

At What Cost

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Summary: Hercules is constantly trying to get Zeus' attention, when is the cost was finally too high?

At What Cost

At What Cost? Young Herc Fan Fiction by kaly razrbkr@juno.com

Disclaimer: as much as I wish the YH boys were mine, alas, they aren't. They belong to ren pic and alliance usa (did I finally get that right?) From this I make no money - duh ;-)

notes: I've written two younger age stories for these characters before, but never young Jason. So, I really hope I manage to get his character as least mostly right. Feedback is craved! :-)

At What Cost?

The sun was just peaking over the horizon when three cadets from Chieron's academy set out for a few days of fishing. An impromptu break called by the headmaster had left the cadets with nothing to do, and Hercules had suggested to Jason and Iolaus that they go fishing at a river just over a half-day's hike away.

"Herc, I'm curious about something," Iolaus asked, breaking the silence as they walked.

Hercules looked over his shoulder at his blond friend, "What would that be, Iolaus?"

"Well," he said, jogging to catch up to the tall cadet, "it's just, you don't like to fish and I doubt Jason even knows how. . ."

"I do too know how to fish, Iolaus," Jason interrupted.

"Yeah, sure you do," Iolaus tossed over his shoulder before continuing. "Like I was saying, why did you of all people suggest

this trip?"

Hercules shrugged. "Just sounded like something fun to do, I guess. Something different."

Iolaus looked at him doubtfully, but merely replied, "Uh-huh. Fun. You do know what it takes to gut a fish, right?"

"It's not like I've never done it before, Iolaus," Hercules said, glancing at the smaller cadet.

The blond giggled, "Good, cause that's something else I doubt good ole Jason has a clue about," he said with a conspiratorial wink to Jason, so that he would play along with his ploy to cause Hercules to cook. "And since I'll be the one catching all the fish, someone else will have to clean them."

"Yeah, Hercules," Jason added with a sly grin, "I wouldn't want to get my hands dirty or anything."

Rolling his eyes, Hercules replied, "Oh, right. Might be a state emergency if you got a little dirt under your nails."

"Exactly," Iolaus responded with a smirk before Jason could open his mouth. "So, I hope you can remember any of what Alcmene taught you about cooking."

Pausing, Hercules looked at his two friends, uncertain, "Wait, do you need a fire? I'm not supposed to play with flint rocks."

Hands on his hips, Jason laughed, "That's it. We're gonna starve."

"Don't worry," Iolaus replied, straight-faced, placing a hand on Hercules' shoulder, "My mommy says I'm old enough to start fires myself."

"Yes, but I'd rather we didn't burn down the entire forest," Hercules dead-panned.

From where he was walking ahead, Jason turned to face the other two. "Guys, if you don't mind, I'd like to get there sometime today," he paused, looking at Iolaus, "That is, if I'm going to disprove your little theory about my not being able to fish."

Glancing at Hercules, Iolaus said, "He's got a point, Herc. This I have to see."

"You've got a point, too," Hercules said with a grin.

After that, they continued to walk toward the river that Hercules had told them about. The journey passed quickly as they kept teasing and joking. It wasn't yet noon when they reached the bank of a rushing river.

"Uh, Herc?" Iolaus asked, looking out at the water.

"What?" the demigod asked, walking up to Iolaus.

Glancing at the taller boy and again across the fast-flowing water,

Iolaus asked, "Just what kind of fish can live in ?"

"Strong ones?" Hercules asked with a laugh.

"I thought you said you knew this was a great fishing hole?" Iolaus asked.

Hercules had opened his mouth to respond when Jason walked up. "I found a pool that's fed by the river, looks like it should have some fish in it."

"See, it is," Hercules added, answering Iolaus' question.

Iolaus looked at Hercules doubtfully, but merely said, "Yeah, maybe." The blond couldn't shake the feeling that something was going on, something that neither he nor Jason knew anything about.

"Come on, Iolaus," Jason said, unaware of the other's concerns. "I want to show you how wrong you are about my fishing abilities."

Iolaus laughed, "More like lack thereof." Grabbing a long branch off of a tree, Iolaus handed it to Jason.

Jason looked at the offered wood, and back up at Iolaus. "What's this for?"

"You have to make your fishing pole," Iolaus stated matter-of-factly.

"I knew that," Jason said quickly.

"Sure you did," Iolaus laughed, breaking off another branch. Pulling his hunting knife from his belt, he began to strip the thin branch of leaves and twigs until it resembled a fishing rod. "Think you can do that?" he asked.

"Just hand over the knife, Iolaus," Jason replied with a smirk.

After watching the exchange, Hercules commented, "I'm gonna go check on a few things. Why don't you two try and figure out how to catch fish." Before either of them could respond, Hercules disappeared into the dense foliage and was gone.

"What was that all about?" Jason asked, confusion showing on his face.

Iolaus shook his head, "He's up to something."

Jason glanced over at Iolaus, "Zeus?"

"Who else?" Iolaus replied, shrugging his shoulders. "Come on, let's catch lunch while he's off playing."

In the forest, Hercules was pressing on toward his true destination. Following a faint trail up a steep incline until he reached a break in the woods. The sound of rushing water reached his ears just before he was able to again see the roaring river. Stepping into a small clearing, Hercules looked at the point where the river disappeared

into a thundering waterfall.

Sometime before, Hercules had heard a rumor of a cave at the base of the waterfall where Zeus had hidden an ancient stone that supposedly had the ability to allow mortals to change into any number of monsters. Not that he wanted that particular ability, but he couldn't help but think that finding it would get Zeus' attention.

Looking at where the water tumbled over the edge, Hercules swallowed audibly. The catch, and reason why no one had ever succeeded in grabbing the stone, was it wasn't possible to reach the cave from base of the waterfall. To get inside the cave, one had to jump from a large, flat stone in the middle of the river at the top of the waterfall.

A shaky path of scattered rocks cut across the river, ending at the center boulder. Taking a deep breath, Hercules decided to get a better look at the jump and began to slowly walk across the rocks.

Meanwhile, Iolaus and Jason had begun fishing in the pool Jason had found. "Let's see," the prince said, looking at the fish they had collected. "That's three for me, and wait. . . Iolaus, I only see one fish for you."

"Just shut up and fish, Jason," Iolaus muttered, not looking up from his fishing pole. A moment later, he looked up, saying, "Hey, I noticed that waterfall upstream, earlier. What do you say we go check it out?"

Jason laughed, "Is that a diversion?"

"Maybe," Iolaus admitted, "but it has to be more fun than just sitting here all afternoon while Herc runs around being sneaky."

Jason put his fishing pole down on the ground, commenting, "You've got a point there, actually." Standing up, he added, "Let's go."

Iolaus jumped up, energetic as always. "Race you to the base," he said and took off.

Jason laughed and ran after him, but ran into his back when Iolaus stopped suddenly. "Iolaus, what . . ."

"What does he think he's doing?" Iolaus asked, not paying attention to Jason's interrupted question.

Following Iolaus' line of sight, Jason saw what had given his friend pause. His arms outstretched to keep balance, Hercules was slowly walking across the very top of the waterfall. "He's doing something stupid," Jason said and the two friends began to rush through the woods toward the crest of the waterfall.

When they broke through the last of the forest before reaching the river, Hercules was just stepping onto the center rock. "Don't even think about it," Jason yelled at his friend.

Hercules' head shot up, and he was startled to see his friends

rushing toward the river. "What are you two doing here?"

"Saving your butt, from the look of it," Iolaus commented over the water's noise as they reached the edge of the river.

Taking a tentative step onto the first rock, Jason began to inch across the river. A moment later, an uneasy Iolaus followed his lead. "So what is so special about this waterfall, Hercules?" Jason asked.

"Nothing I can't handle," Hercules responded defiantly.

Jason shook his head as he stepped onto the large rock that held Hercules. "Bull. This has something to do with Zeus, just like always."

Standing on the rock just to the side of the center, Iolaus added, "Jason's right. It always does, doesn't it, Herc? What is it this time? A monsoon in a bottle?"

"It's nothing like that," Hercules said, shaking his head. "It's just something I have to do."

"Like the cyclone urn?" Iolaus asked.

"Or the fleece?" Jason questioned.

"That wasn't what the fleece was about, Jason," Hercules responded, "and you know it."

His arms across his chest, Jason asked, "Do I?"

Changing the topic, Iolaus offered, "Herc, why don't you just get out of the middle of this river? How about that? Come on, buddy, lets discuss this on dry land."

"You go back if you want to, I'm staying here," Hercules said stubbornly.

Taking a step closer to Hercules, Jason asked, "Why? Daddy's not gonna come storming down here just because you take a header off of some waterfall. Why don't you just give it up?"

"At least I have a father to come, if he wants to," Hercules replied angrily.

"Hey!" Jason and Iolaus cried simultaneously.

His eyes dark, Jason then responded, "If he wants to, which I'm guessing he doesn't. Seeing as how you've never even met him!"

"Jase, calm down," Iolaus cut in. Looking at Hercules' seething features, he then added, "But he might have a point, however inelegantly put."

"Jealous, Jason?" Hercules asked, not acknowledging Iolaus' attempts to disarm the situation.

"Of you?" Jason questioned, pushing Hercules' shoulder. "Never."

Hercules laughed humorlessly. "I don't believe you." Pushing Jason back by both shoulders, the demigod realized his mistake a moment too late. Jason's momentum from the push propelled him into Iolaus. Thrown off balance on the unsteady rock, Iolaus' arms pinwheeled in an attempt to regain his balance. Reaching out quickly, Hercules managed to grab Jason's arm before he fell over the water's edge. Iolaus, however, lost his fight and was sucked under the surging water.

"Iolaus!" Jason yelled, as the last glimpse they caught of Iolaus was his blond curls as he fell over the edge of the waterfall. "What did you do?" Jason asked over his shoulder to a shocked Hercules before jumping into the water after Iolaus.

Hercules watched as Jason, too, disappeared into the water. "I don't know . . ." he muttered through his shock. To the lone cadet remaining at the top of the waterfall, seconds drug out into eternity. He blinked his eyes, struggling against the shock in his mind, and although his delay was a mere instant, in Hercules' mind it was far too long.

Taking a deep breath, he jumped into the torrential waters and quickly plunged down the waterfall. Instinctively, he pinched his nose shut, and floundered to control his descent. He was startled when he slammed into the ground, but not the surging waters of the river.

His eyes flying open, he looked around the unexpected surroundings. To his surprise, he had managed to land inside the hidden cave. In the darkened recesses of the cave, he could just barely make out a tunnel. He knew that it must lead to the stone he had been searching for.

The demigod knew he had a choice, grab the stone and hope Zeus noticed, or help his friends. Hercules was jumping through the curtain of water before he even had time to finish the question. They were his friends, and he owed them. It was his fault they were in danger in the first place.

When he was clear of the falling water, Hercules fought against the raging current and blinked to keep the water out of his eyes. A few near-panicked moments later, he caught sight of Jason struggling to pull Iolaus from the river. Even across the distance between them, Hercules could see that Iolaus wasn't helping Jason fight the current. He redoubled his efforts to reach them, knowing that Iolaus wasn't able to swim.

In the time it took Hercules to catch up to them, Jason reached the shore and began dragging the motionless Iolaus up the river bank. Pulling himself from the water, Hercules rushed up to help Jason carry Iolaus.

Although still angry with Hercules, Jason was grateful for the help carrying Iolaus. Once they had him settled on the ground several yards from the water, Jason looked over at Hercules. "Thanks for the help," the prince said, with a twinge of bitterness in his voice.

"Jason . . ." Hercules said.

Jason was kneeling beside Iolaus, his ear just above the smaller cadet's mouth. "I don't think he's breathing," he said, ignoring Hercules.

Dropping down beside his two friends, Hercules' features were ashen. "Let's turn him on his side," he said quickly.

"Turn him . . ."

Hercules nodded his head, and lifted Iolaus onto his left side. "On his side," Hercules finished Jason's statement. "Now, pound on his back."

Seeing what Hercules had in mind, Jason began to hit Iolaus' back with his closed fists. After a few moments, Jason said, "I'm not sure this is working, Hercules."

"It has to," the demigod said defiantly. "Do you hear me, Iolaus?" he yelled. "You have to breathe, buddy."

A sputtering cough interrupted him, and Jason stopped pounding on Iolaus' back. "That's it, Iolaus. Just keep coughing."

When Iolaus continued to draw shuddering breaths, Hercules laughed in relief. "Looks like he swallowed the entire river."

Jason nodded, and was about to reply when his vision swam. He closed his eyes against the dizzy sensation. Blinking slowly, he waited until the world steadied before saying, "He really does need to learn how to swim, doesn't he?"

Distracted by Iolaus' shallow breathing, Hercules missed the pained look that crossed Jason's face. "Something like that." Watching as his best friend continued to breathe steadily, Hercules silently berated himself for causing the situation in the first place.

"It's getting late," Jason said, standing up carefully when the world again began to tilt precariously, "we should probably set up a camp." Pressing a hand to his forehead, Jason felt a large knot forming just above the hairline. Hissing when he touched the cut at the center of the bump, he paused before adding, "I'll get a fire started. We all need to dry out."

Still watching Iolaus, Hercules stood up and walked over to Jason. "Good idea. I'll walk back upstream to where we left our gear." He had just turned to leave when he noticed Jason close his eyes slowly. "You okay, Jase?"

Careful not to nod, Jason replied, "Sure. Never better. I love jumping over a waterfall and nearly drowning."

Looking at Jason tentatively, Hercules said, "About what happened up there . . ."

"Not now, Hercules," Jason said, cutting him off. "Right now, we need to deal with making sure Iolaus is okay and getting dry."

"You're sure that you're okay?"

"Yes. Now go," Jason said determinedly.

With a nod, Hercules responded, "I'll be back as soon as I can," and disappeared into the thick brush.

After Hercules left, Jason concentrated on gathering enough tinder to build and keep up a fire for the night. Staying close to where Iolaus was still laying, unconscious, Jason was busy collecting wood when a branch hit him on the side. "Ouch," he muttered, pulling open his vest to look at his side. A large bruise was darkening on his side, and he gasped in pain when he probed it. "Great," he complained to himself, "Just great. What else is going to go wrong?"

Closing his vest, but not fastening it, Jason finished gathering the wood and returned to where Iolaus was lying. The prince had just finished lighting the first of the tinder when he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. Turning slowly, Jason realized that Iolaus was finally beginning to awaken.

Walking over to him and kneeling, Jason placed a hand on his shoulder. "It's okay, Iolaus. You're all right."

Iolaus' gaze skimmed his surroundings and finally settled on Jason's concerned eyes. "Jason?"

Nodding, Jason replied with a grin, "Well, at least you got that much right."

"Where's Herc? Is he okay?" Iolaus asked, trying to half sit up as he looked around for his missing friend.

Forcing Iolaus to lie back down, Jason replied, "Hercules' is fine. He just went to find our packs."

Iolaus nodded and closed his eyes. "So what happened up there, exactly?" he asked, not opening his eyes.

Shrugging slightly, Jason said, "I'm not really sure."

"Thanks for pulling me out of the river," Iolaus mumbled.

Jason grinned, "Yeah, well. I figured, why not?"

"Sure, buddy. You just couldn't live without my staggering sense of humor," Iolaus commented dryly.

Jason walked over to check on the fire, asking, "Is that staggering good, or staggering bad?"

"Ha, ha. Very funny," Iolaus said, sneaking a peek at the fire. "Now how about helping me over to the fire, huh?"

Laughing, Jason helped Iolaus stand up and limp over to the fire. "Guess in all the excitement we overlooked your busted leg," Jason observed. As he guided Iolaus across the short distance, Jason kept blinking to clear his vision, as the fire danced in front in his sight.

"What excitement?" Iolaus asked, gritting his teeth against the pain,

as he settled down next to the fire. Jason looked around and found two branches that would work for a splint, and set to work on Iolaus' leg.

Looking up at Iolaus, Jason had to fight the urge to laugh. "You can't be serious. You remember, going over a waterfall, nearly drowning . . ."

Iolaus nodded, "That's what I'm talking about. How come I was out for so long?"

"Because you inhaled about half of the river, that's why," Jason commented in response, as he finished tying the branches together with some vine.

Giggling softly, Iolaus asked, "I guess I really should learn how to swim."

"That's what I said," Jason grinned.

A few silent moments passed before Iolaus asked, "So, um, Jase. What's for dinner?"

Standing, Jason coughed and replied, "Iolaus, only you could nearly drown and still be worried about what your next meal is."

"Just part of my charm," the blond remarked. "Besides, the rabbits should be coming out of their burrows soon, you could catch one."

Walking away, Jason looked over his shoulder to say, "Gee, Iolaus. I'd hate to show you up at hunting, too," and he escaped into the forest before Iolaus could manage a retort.

Hunting for rabbits was slow going because Jason had to stop often to allow his head to stop spinning. No matter what the cadet tried, his vision was getting worse. Pushed forward only because of adrenaline, the prince finally succeeded in snaring a rabbit. Wincing when he tried to take a deep breath, Jason began to walk shakily back toward the campsite.

While Jason was searching for dinner, Hercules returned to the camp. Seeing Iolaus sitting up beside the fire, he smiled. "You're awake."

Iolaus nodded, "Good observational skills there, Herc."

"How do you feel?" Hercules asked, dropping the packs onto the ground.

Iolaus laughed, "Alive. Which is something I was concerned about while I was falling."

Hercules nodded, "Yeah, about that . . ."

He was interrupted when Iolaus looked past him and cried out, "Jason? Are you okay?"

Hercules turned to see the third cadet stumble into the small clearing. "Jason?" Hercules also asked when the prince didn't

respond. Jason looked at his two friends uncertainly, drew a trembling breath, and opened his mouth to reply. Instead, he collapsed onto the ground.

"Jason!" Iolaus cried, and struggled to his feet, but soon found himself back on the ground as his leg gave out beneath him.

At the same time, Hercules was rushing to Jason's side. "Jason?" he asked quietly, shaking him by the shoulder. When Jason didn't respond, Hercules picked the larger cadet up and carried him over near the fire. Cautiously laying him beside the fire, Hercules tried to figure out what had happened.

In the meantime, Iolaus managed to crawl over to Jason's side, and looked up at Hercules. "What do you think is wrong?"

"I don't know," Hercules replied, his voice unsure.

Catching a glimpse of the firelight reflecting off Jason's hair, Iolaus reached out an uncertain hand and felt Jason's head. "Herc, I think I've found the problem." Hercules followed Iolaus' line of sight, and saw the knot just above Jason's hairline.

"I've found one here, too," Hercules said, pulling Jason's vest away from his side to reveal a deep purple bruise.

Seeing the additional injury, Iolaus continued. "Herc, Jason may be in real trouble if he doesn't wake up. We have to go back."

Looking at Iolaus, Hercules replied, "How?" He gestured toward Iolaus' leg, "You can't even walk. And we'd never make it through this forest in the middle of the night. We don't know it well enough."

Iolaus shook his head, "I can make a pair of crutches easily enough, and we could head out at first light."

Not acknowledging Iolaus' optimistic words, Hercules sat back and looked between his two injured friends. Dropping his head into his hands, he muttered, "Everything's going to Tartarus, and it's all my fault."

Instead of a more typical flip remark, Iolaus asked, "Why do you do it, Herc?"

"Do what?" Hercules asked, not looking up.

"Keep doing crazy things just to get Zeus' attention," Iolaus elaborated.

Raising his gaze to meet Iolaus', Hercules responded simply, "He's my father."

Iolaus shook his head, and glancing down at Jason, offered, "Does that really make it worth it, Herc? I can tell you, sometimes it's better when your dad isn't around." Mumbling, he added, "At least that was true for me."

"What?" Hercules asked, confused.

Sighing, Iolaus replied, avoiding the question. "Nothing. Just that maybe your life wouldn't be that much better even if Zeus was around."

Still curious as to what Iolaus meant about his father, Hercules let the question go and merely nodded his head, "Maybe." In the silence that followed, the only sounds were the crackling of the wood in the fire and Jason's labored breathing.

A little while later, Iolaus began to try and stand up on his good leg. "What do you think you're doing?" Hercules asked.

"What does it look like?" Iolaus replied, "I have to make a set of crutches if we want to leave tomorrow morning."

Standing, Hercules stretched his arms up over his head, "Just stay here and keep an eye on Jason. I'll find the branches; you can't just hop around." As Iolaus settled back down, Hercules began to search for suitable branches when he found Jason's long forgotten game. "Speaking of hopping," Hercules commented as he picked up the small rabbit and showed it to Iolaus.

"Hand it here, I'll cook while you're gone," Iolaus offered.

With half a strained smile, Hercules responded, "Can't pass this offer up, now can I? I've never even seen you cook." Handing the rabbit to Iolaus, Hercules set off into the woods.

As the night passed, neither Iolaus nor Hercules managed to get much sleep. Apprehension hung over the campsite like a fog, as each of them kept a watchful eye on Jason until just before dawn.

"Herc?" Iolaus' voice shook Hercules from a restless doze.

Startled from sleep, Hercules looked at Iolaus and asked, "What?"

"It's not light yet, but we need to go. Now." Fully awake, Hercules looked over at Jason. "His breathing is getting worse, Herc," Iolaus finished.

Hercules nodded, and moved the litter he had built over next to Jason. He carefully picked up the unaware prince and placed him on the litter. After Jason was secured, Hercules reached over to help Iolaus stand up.

Leaning heavily on the crude crutches, Iolaus nodded his thanks, saying "Come on, Herc. We better get going." With that, Iolaus turned and started walking slowly in the direction of the academy.

After seeing that Iolaus was making progress on his crutches, Hercules leaned over and picked up the handles of the litter. Pulling Jason behind him, Hercules began to follow Iolaus through the thick brush.

What had been only a half-day's walk the day before, stretched out before the weary cadets. Progress was slow, as several times Hercules had to reach out a quick hand to keep Iolaus from stumbling on the debris-strewn forest floor. Luckily, the sun was soon peaking over the horizon and lighting the woods around them.

"How far do you think we've gone?" Hercules asked, breaking the silence that filled the woodlands.

Pausing to adjust his crutches, Iolaus managed a shrug. "Not sure. At least we should make better time now that the sun is up."

Flexing his hands so as to get a better grip on the litter, Hercules replied, "Good." Pausing, he looked over at his friend, "But how are you holding up?"

Ignoring the constant protest from his injured leg, Iolaus sped up his pace. "I'm fine. Jason's the one who's really hurt."

Walking faster to keep up with Iolaus, Hercules recognized Iolaus' diversion from his own injuries. "Yeah, I do something stupid and you two pay the price," Hercules muttered.

Hearing Hercules' comment, Iolaus replied, "Let's just concentrate on getting back and getting Jason some help, Herc." Iolaus didn't like the self-recrimination in his friend's voice, and knew talking like that was only liable to slow them down.

"Yeah," was Hercules' only response as they continued to press on.

Some time later, they finally emerged from the woods and Iolaus paused to shield his eyes from the brilliant sunlight. "This should make it much easier," he said before he took a deep breath and continued walking.

Although he didn't comment, Hercules watched Iolaus' strained progress with wary eyes. He had no doubt that the smaller cadet would continue until they knew Jason was safe, but Hercules could see the toll that their journey was taking on him. With a glance up at the sun, Hercules said, "We used up half of the day just walking through the forest. Right now I hope we make it to the academy before nightfall."

"Uh, Herc? When did Chieron say he would be back from his trip?" Iolaus asked.

Not pausing, Hercules tried to remember what the headmaster had said. "Sometime tomorrow I think."

Iolaus stopped, and turned to look back at Hercules. "That's what I was afraid of. Sometime , Herc. Not tonight."

Having caught up to Iolaus, Hercules pressed on, responding, "We'll just do what we have to when the time comes, I guess."

"That's what I was afraid of," Iolaus said, shaking his head as he hobbled next to Jason's litter. "How is it that nothing is ever for us?"

Hercules' assessment of how long it would take to reach the academy wasn't far off. The sun was just touching the horizon when the academy finally came into sight. Breathing a sigh, of relief, Iolaus found additional energy in knowing they were almost there.

"How's Jason doing, Herc?" he asked around exerted breaths.

Glancing over his shoulder at his charge, Hercules observed, "About the same I think." Iolaus nodded, but didn't reply. "How about you?"

"Herc, didn't I tell you I was fine?" Iolaus retorted.

Hercules sighed, "Yes, you did. I just never said I believed you."

"Well, I am," Iolaus said stubbornly, but the effect was lessened when he winced as his leg bumped against a large rock in the road.

Hoping to delay the argument that was sure to come, Hercules relented. "Sure, Iolaus. You're fine."

Walking into the deserted academy, Iolaus called out, "Hello? Anyone here?"

Silence was the only response, and Hercules knelt down next to Jason. "Iolaus, we may have to go to the healer's."

"You know what Gregus said, Herc," Iolaus reminded him. He doesn't want to see any of us 'academy rascals' anymore. Besides . . ."
Iolaus stopped speaking when a noise echoed through the main building. Tilting his head to the side, he listened for the source of the noise.

"Besides, what, Iolaus?" Hercules asked, looking up from where he was kneeling next to Jason.

Slowly, Iolaus began to cross the large room. He paused long enough to hold a hand up to silence Hercules. The demigod watched in confusion as Iolaus limped noiselessly through one of the large doorways toward the mess hall.

Silently cursing the noisy crutches, Iolaus followed the noise into the kitchen. Pushing the door open suddenly, he hoped to catch whoever it was off-guard. "Hold it right . . ." he yelled, hopping into the kitchen, ". . . there," he finished a bit more quietly.

"Iolaus? What are you up to?" Chieron asked, having been startled by the sneaking cadet.

His eyes wide, Iolaus said, "Chieron! You're back early! Come on, you've got to help Jason." Turning, he hobbled back to Hercules and Jason as fast as he could.

"What do you mean?" Chieron questioned, noting with dismay Iolaus' disheveled appearance. "Iolaus, what is wrong with Jason?"

Iolaus stopped and turned to face the stern headmaster. "An accident at the river where the three of us went to fish," he explained vaguely.

"An accident? What type of accident?"

"I fell in and Jason jumped in after me," Iolaus replied, deliberately obscuring some of the details of what happened.

Chieron shook his head. He had the suspicion that he wasn't hearing the whole story. "Where is he now?"

Relieved to be out from under Chieron's scrutiny, Iolaus began moving back toward the large main room. "Back here, Herc's watching him."

When Iolaus walked through the door, Hercules looked up, saying, "About time, Iolaus. Why'd you run off? We need to go see Gre . . .". Hercules paused when he saw that Chieron was following Iolaus. "Chieron! Thank the gods you're here. Jason's hurt."

After walking over to the unconscious cadet Chieron said, "Bring him to the infirmary so I can examine his injuries."

Hercules nodded, picked up the handles of the litter and followed Chieron and Iolaus to the infirmary. When they got there, Hercules helped the headmaster untangle Jason from the homemade stretcher. Carefully, they laid him onto a long table.

Glancing over at the two anxious cadets, Chieron said, "This might take a little while. Why don't the two of you go and find something to eat in the kitchen?" When neither made a move to respond, he added, "You misunderstand, that wasn't a suggestion."

Nodding, Hercules and Iolaus cast a last glance to Jason and left the room. Upon reaching the kitchen, Iolaus sat gratefully on one of the wooden chairs while Hercules found food for both of them. "Herc?" Iolaus asked.

Peeking out from one of the cabinets he was digging through, Hercules replied, "Yeah?"

"Don't mention anything to Chieron about the waterfall," Iolaus said, rotating his worn out shoulders.

Hercules' attention shot to his friend, "What do you mean? That's what caused all this trouble."

Iolaus nodded, "I know, but that part of it is between us, don't you think?"

"I don't think so, Iolaus. I mean, what would I tell Chieron?" Hercules asked, placing a loaf of bread and some cheese on the table.

Iolaus grabbed a piece of bread and waited while Hercules found something to drink before replying. "I told him that I fell in and Jason jumped in the river after me. End of story, you don't have to tell him anything."

"But, Iolaus . . ." Herc started to say, but stopped when Iolaus held up a hand.

"No, but, Herc," the blond managed around a mouthful of bread.

Hercules opened his mouth to respond but thought better of it and settled for taking a bite of bread instead.

Sometime later, Chieron walked into the kitchen. Hercules was sitting there, nursing a glass of water while Iolaus had laid his head down on the table and fallen asleep. "He'll be okay," the centaur told Hercules quietly, so as to not wake Iolaus.

The demigod's attention darted Chieron. "You're sure?"

Nodding, Chieron said, "There are no broken ribs, no fever, and I've put a poultice on his head injury. I think he should be awake tomorrow."

Hercules sighed in relief. "That's good." Motioning over at Iolaus he asked, "What about his leg?"

"My next challenge," the centaur said, and walked over to where Iolaus was sleeping. Carefully, he picked the dozing cadet up and began to walk back to the infirmary.

Hercules stood to follow Chieron from the kitchen. "I hope he doesn't wake up until you get there."

"Why's that?" Chieron asked over his shoulder.

Hercules laughed softly, "It's just that he being carried like a little kid."

"Why am I not surprised?" Chieron asked with a short laugh.

After Chieron was finished examining Iolaus, the headmaster left the three boys to sleep in the infirmary. He knew that since Jason and Iolaus couldn't leave Hercules wouldn't leave either.

Just after dawn, Hercules awoke to see Jason's eyes open. "Jase?" he asked softly, glancing over at the sleeping Iolaus to make sure he hadn't woken him up as well.

Jason blinked slowly, and watched as Hercules walked over and sat next to his bed. "Hercules? How'd we get back here?"

"I made a litter and dragged you back," Hercules said simply.

Trying to sit up on his elbows but not succeeding, Jason attempted to look around the room but settled on asking, "Iolaus? Where is he? I mean, his leg was hurt."

Hercules smiled and gestured to where Iolaus was sleeping. "He walked on crutches. He was determined that we get you back here."

"Sounds like Iolaus," Jason said.

Hercules nodded, but grew somber when he said, "I'm sorry, Jason."

"Hercules . . ."

"No," he interrupted. "I need to say this. I could've gotten you

killed, just to get Zeus' attention."

"You could have gotten killed, Hercules," Jason said. "That's why I was so angry back at the waterfall. You have to stop worrying so much about getting Zeus' attention. One day it might not be worth the cost."

"It wasn't worth it," Hercules replied. "Not after watching the two of you falling in the river, and for that I'll always be sorry."

Jason grinned, "Probably won't be the last time we're in trouble because of you." He paused before adding, "But, apology accepted."

"Ahh, you two had a moment," Iolaus interrupted with a sleepy grin.

Hercules laughed, "You finally woke up. How long have you been listening?"

"Long enough," he replied seriously, looking Hercules in the eye. A moment later he continued with a smirk. "Yeah, yeah. I finally woke up. Tell that to sleeping beauty over there," he said, pointing at Jason.

"You flatter me, Iolaus," Jason replied with a smug grin. "About time you realized I was the looks of this bunch."

Laughing out loud, Iolaus tossed a pillow at Jason, which Hercules batted away. "That's what I think of your looks. I just meant you could use all the beauty sleep you could get, buddy. You've got a lot of ground to cover if you're gonna be better looking than me."

"Have you looked in a mirror lately?" Jason retorted.

"Don't talk to me about mirrors, Jase," Iolaus countered, "just because you break them all."

Jason opened his mouth to speak, but Hercules covered it with a hand. "Guys? You're supposed to be resting, not competing in sparring drills."

Iolaus and Jason looked at Hercules' serious face before settling back down on their cots. "Wet blanket," they muttered simultaneously, straight-faced. Less than a second later, they broke into a fit of relieved laughter.

"Remember what happened the last time you said that?" Hercules asked with a grin.

"Yeah," Jason managed between thin laughter, "Iolaus couldn't swim then, either."

"Hey!" Iolaus exclaimed.

"He's got a point," Hercules said laughing. "Soon as your leg is better, you're learning to swim, buddy."

"Thanks for the offer, guys. Really. But as long as I stay away from waterfalls I'll be fine, thank you very much," Iolaus said, his eyes closed with approaching sleep.

"Now has a point, Hercules," Jason said.

Rolling his eyes Hercules muttered, "Just go to sleep."

"'Night, Hercules," Jason said.

"Day, actually," Iolaus giggled.

Hercules sighed, "Guys . . ."

"Just go to sleep," they muttered together, laughing.

The End

End
file.